

SOVIET AFFAIRS ANALYSIS SERVICE

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Outline Of Reference Paper On:

SOVIET YOUTH IN SEARCH OF A PURPOSE IN LIFE

Disillusionment and longing for a purpose in life are the spiritual rash of the Soviet younger generation, according to many articles in the Soviet press. A new element in the criticism of youth is that the young people singled out are not stilyagi--the Soviet zoot-suiters--but members of the Komsomol and university graduates.

Frequent questions about their purpose in life plague many Soviet youths sent to work in the remote regions of the Soviet Union. "What new life am I building?" asked a youth at work digging trenches beyond the Arctic Circle.

Other, bolder, outbursts of this kind are branded by Soviet commentators as manifestations of a possessive mentality, birthmarks of capitalism. However, the Soviet writers are forced to admit that these "survivals from the past" are found among those who had no direct knowledge of capitalism.

Premier Khrushchev, speaking at the All-Russian Teachers Congress in Moscow, deplored this, the Soviet nihilism, and warned that further neglect in ideological education might delay the building of Communism. The importance the Soviet leaders attach to inculcating "high Communist awareness" into the Soviet youth was indicated by the thousands of medals awarded to teachers as an encouragement to them to spend all their efforts at re-educating the disillusioned Soviet youth.

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Symptoms of disillusionment and of longing for a purpose in life beset the Soviet younger generation--the generation which "people have become accustomed to call the builders of Communism." In complaining about this spiritual rash, many articles and stories in the Soviet press deplore the widespread attitude of indifference to Communist goals arising from it.

A new element of the complaints is that the disillusioned young people are not "idle parasites" or "stilyagi," that is, "zoot-suiters" or "teddy-boys," but members of the Komsomol, high school or university graduates -- in other words, young members of the Soviet intelligentsia.

On July 4, 1960, the official Soviet youth organ, Komsomolskaya Pravda, published a letter written to the editor by three women Komsomol members employed as teachers in a village in the Murmansk district. The writers of the letter asked whether it was possible nowadays for the human heart to experience enthusiasm and where the purpose of life lay for the contemporary "Soviet man." They wrote:

In the evenings, we often discuss the question: what is the meaning of life? Haven't we turned into philistines? We appreciate, of course, that the main purpose confronting us is the building of Communism, but each human being must have his own special purpose, of which he is really aware. We have no such purpose. What, therefore, is the meaning of life?... We have no enthusiasm. In fact, can enthusiasm exist these days?

According to the newspaper's correspondent, who comments upon the letter, one of its writers, a teacher of Russian language and literature, is engulfed in a "bottomless pit of misery." She goes on: "Rosa had not gone through any unhappy experience, neither had her relatives, friends or colleagues. The girl was simply sick of life. How often and with what anguish she pronounced this phrase!"

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A more vivid example of disillusionment is contained in a story entitled "Thawed Land," published in the journal Yunost (Youth, 1960, No. 6). The story presents the letter of an 18-year-old youth who had gone to work in a district beyond the Arctic Circle after graduating from the ten-year secondary school. The youth writes:

Only last May, seven months ago, I finished the ten-year high school. I dreamed of immediately becoming one of the builders of a new life. Well, I am a builder, and in one of the hardest districts at that, but how dreary it all seems. What common cause am I serving? What new life am I building? All I am doing is digging a trench--work so purposeless. Do you think that this is what I dreamed of? Is this what I have linked my life with? Does building Communism mean digging trenches? If so, then why did I study for ten years?.... It begins to look as if I shall never understand why I am on this earth at all. I am beginning to be afraid.

According to the Soviet press, at the time when "the whole society was angrily condemning Pasternak's perfidy" many young people who regarded the writer as their "spiritual father" offered up incense to him and some even paid him "visits of condolence" (Stalinskoe Plemya, (Stalin's Generations, December 23, 1959). Materials received from him were read aloud to friends or at various "literary get-togethers." Stalinskoe Plemya remarks: "Every line... exhales the gloom and the futility of the grave, blindness and powerlessness, hatred for the new world which Soviet people are building." The paper complains that many "creative-minded young people" in the USSR are followers of Pasternak.

Yury Shcherbak, a Komsomol member and junior scientific associate of the Kiev Institute of Microbiology and Epidemiology, is also a young writer. According to Stalinskoe Plemya, the "creative sink" of this man's mind

.... reeks of hostility, of lack of respect, and sometimes of undisguised hatred for his home town, for his own people. What dreadful names and descriptions the author gives the characters in his so-called "social play," "Sweaty Legs"! The protagonist is Gnusko (from gnusny, meaning "foul"), a cretin who is "the hope of future society." He is surrounded by such characters as Khanzhiev (from khanzha, meaning a "bigot" or "hypocrite"), the realist, and Shval ("riffraff"), the faculty dean. Every word is dirt, a mockery of everything around. "Decent people" as such do not appear, for in the author's opinion they should not be on the stage.

Sometimes the disillusionment of the younger generations turns into open revolt against Soviet policy. For instance, a letter to the editor from Aleksei N., of Ioshkar-Ola in the June 11, 1960, issue of Komsomolskaya Pravda questioned the high placement of rocketry in the Soviet scale of values:

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What have these sputniks and rockets brought the ordinary mortal, including myself?... Does it not seem to you that this interest in sputniks and in the outer space in general is premature? I mean, we still need living accommodations and day nurseries, and goods are so expensive while this rocket--I have no doubt--eats up so much that everyone would certainly exclaim with surprise if he knew how much it cost.

Tell any worker: "Ivan, if we hadn't shot off this rocket, your little boy would be going to a kindergarten, Boston cloth would cost not four hundred rubles a meter but only half as much, and you would be able to buy an electric iron"--and I am sure he would say: "For God's sake, don't shoot off any more rockets." One rocket after another, and who needs them now?

Of course, this bold outburst is branded as the manifestation of a "possessive mentality," one of the "birthmarks" of capitalism and an inheritance from the past. Soviet Communist writers sometimes have to admit that these "survivals of the past" are to be found among those who were born after the revolution--people who have had no direct experience of capitalism and who constitute 75 per cent of the population. Partiinaya Zhizn (Party Life, 1960, No. 7) puts it this way:

In fact, the reverse is often true: the man who was born and lived under capitalism, who had direct experience of its "charms" and was schooled in the struggle with it, is a progressive member of our socialist society, while he who has not lived under a capitalist regime bears its "birthmarks."

The ironic twist suggests that the most reliable builders of the new society in the USSR are those who today are 55 years old or more. Komsomolskaya Pravda noted:

Ivan Zakusin is seventy years old. Zakusin's heart aches for the common good... Valentina Agarkova is only nineteen, and Valentina is worried about her own welfare, her own kitchen garden, her own livestock (June 1, 1960).

On April 28, 1960, Komsomolskaya Pravda reprinted a letter written by the Komsomol Bureau Secretary for the Department of Journalism of Leningrad University, describing the mentality and attitude of students who make a show of being bored with the study of Marxism-Leninism and who protest against "social interference" in their private lives:

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Passivity, seclusion in their own obscure little world of private affairs and experience, fear that they may be "lassoed"-- that is the picture presented by many students of the philological department. Twenty or thirty unselfish students, who show initiative and have the mentality of the collectivist and public worker, sit up until late at night organizing or publishing something, helping somebody, while the rest are engaged in study, lectures, catching up with examinations, private reading and family affairs. Leave them alone, let them live in peace.

On January 9 of this year, the Party Central Committee issued a resolution on the "Tasks of Propaganda in Present-Day Conditions," stressing the need for intensifying propaganda among young people. Six months later, on June 27, 1960, Pravda printed a leading article admitting that too little attention was being devoted to the education of young people in a spirit of "Soviet patriotism, socialist internationalism and Communist morality," that there was no determined daily struggle against "bourgeois ideology and the survivals of capitalism."

A few days later, on July 4, Pravda published contributions from correspondents pointing out the need to provide for a "Communist" education in schools, to create special textbooks for teachers of this "new discipline," and, if necessary, to "refresh" teaching staffs. The All-Russian Congress of Teachers, held in Moscow from July 6 to July 9, was mainly devoted to this question. At the Congress, Khrushchev admitted that among Soviet youths

... who have not passed through the good school of life, a superficial and even contemptuous attitude to manual work, a parasitical outlook, are still to be observed. There is evidence of a lack of ideas or principles, a kind of nihilism. This is due primarily to serious shortcomings in the educational work of schools, of the Komsomol and of Party organizations (Pravda, July 10, 1960).

Khrushchev declared that it was impossible to reconcile oneself to this state of affairs any longer and stressed once more that neglect of the education of Soviet citizens in a spirit of "high Communist awareness" might "delay the whole business of "building Communism." He demanded an improvement in the quality of teaching in all subjects taught in schools and announced that the Party Central Committee had decided to introduce a course called "Foundations of Political Knowledge" into the curriculum of secondary schools starting with the next academic year.

In view of Khrushchev's charges of shortcomings of educational work in Soviet schools and in view of the statements of the Soviet press concerning the "ideological and political attitudes of young people in the USSR, a paradoxical note is struck by a decision adopted by the Party Central Committee and the Council of Ministers of the USSR on July 9, 1960, providing for the award of orders and medals to many thousands of persons who had attended teachers' congresses in the various Soviet republics, for their "great services in the education of the younger generation in the spirit of Communism." This decision shows that official citations in the USSR are awarded not so much as a recognition of services already rendered as an encouragement for such services in the future, especially when such services are especially necessary to the Soviet leaders, as in the case of re-educating the country's disillusioned youth.